



“How do you
plant kudzu?
You throw it
down and run.”

DR. STRANGELEAF

or: How I learned to stop complaining and love the kudzu

By Carol Penn-Romine

“How do you plant kudzu? You throw it down and run.”

So goes the joke in the southeastern United States, where the vine grows with the tenacity of a leafy green pit bull. It is estimated that this aggressive foliage grows a foot a day in summer and covers about seven million acres. That’s enough to cover the entire state of Massachusetts and overlap its neighbors.

It is hard to deny the beauty of a kudzu landscape, whether it’s blanketing a hillside or taking the shape of a barn or a tree that it has swallowed. In fact, those lush, verdant landscapes are as characteristic of the South as all the admonitions to “See Rock City” that call from the rooftops of barns across the region.

Not many people actually consider eating the pesky vine. And why not? Kudzu is plentiful, an understatement if there ever was one. It’s free, every part is edible—leaf, blossom, stem and root—and it’s a nutritional powerhouse, high in fiber and loaded with protein, Vitamin A, calcium and potassium. You don’t even have to plant it—it’s there for the picking. All that’s involved is a little ingenuity—and the willingness to look past kudzu’s reputation as pigeon in plant form.

Growing up in the rural South, I was taught that kudzu was an evil thing, with an acquisitive, destructive nature. While I knew it was the enemy, I secretly admired its beauty and wondered if it harbored a good side that I’d never been allowed to glimpse.

Today as a chef, I try to be empirical, the scientist unfazed by any food’s bad rap. Thus I began my experimentation with kudzu. I started out simply, eating the leaves raw, then blanching them in a bit of salted water. Unadorned, they taste profoundly green. Then I fried them in a bit of oil, salting them and munching on them like potato chips. Prepared this way they taste decidedly protein-y. If you’ve ever had padum in an Indian restaurant, you know what I mean.

I discovered that the larger the leaf, the tougher it is and the more difficult it is to eat. But the young, tender leaves, which are available in the late spring and early summer, have a soy-like flavor and are easy to assimilate into a meal. When you see the re-greening of the kudzu commence after its winter nap, rush out and pick a basketful of brand-new leaves and try your hand at cooking them.

Be sure you know your kudzu’s source—you don’t want foliage that has been sprayed with pesticides. It may grow conveniently right up to the edge of the road (and could possibly engulf your car should you stop to change a flat or make a cell phone call), but resist the urge to do your harvesting along the beaten path. Be sure to ask permission if you’re collecting kudzu on someone else’s land. They probably won’t mind—have you ever heard anyone complain, “Somebody stole my kudzu!”?—but they’ll surely want to know what you’re up to. They can also tell you if they’ve engaged in chemical warfare against your intended dinner.

I’m sure no Southerner would make the mistake of picking poison oak or poison ivy when seeking out kudzu (given the average Southerner’s acquaintance with all three), but it bears mentioning that all these plants produce similar three-leaf clusters. I don’t think any self-respecting plant would attempt to grow anywhere near kudzu, however, so the chance of confusing it with poisonous vines is slim.

Just what can you do with kudzu?

Use the leaves for most anything you’d do with any other green. Substitute them for grape leaves to make dolmates. Bake a quiche [try the accompanying recipe]. Add the leaves to a salad or cook them up just like you would a pot of spinach, kale or mustard greens. If you’re willing to give kudzu a try but want to ease into it slowly, mix the leaves with other greens and cook them all together. I’ve found this the best way to make those horsey ol’ collards more palatable.

In the late summer, pick the purple, grape-scented flowers to make jelly, candy or wine. Some people batter and deep fry them like squash blossoms. Use the sap to make syrup. Cook the roots just like you would any other root vegetable, either alone or in combination with carrots, turnips, parsnips and rutabagas.

Dried, powdered kudzu root works well as a thickening agent in cooking. It's a traditional staple in Asia, used as a treatment for alcoholism and an array of other ailments, but that's another story.

If you don't want to eat kudzu, you can still feed the nutrition-dense foliage to your livestock. And you can make candles from the blossoms and weave baskets from the roots.

Essentially, kudzu is out there for our use and experimentation. With some seven million acres of it at your disposal, the supply is practically limitless, so if your experiment flops, no worries! There's plenty more kudzu where that came from.

Carol Penn-Romine grew up on a farm in northwest Tennessee and lived in Memphis for 15 years before moving to Los Angeles, where she is a chef, writer and culinary tour guide. You can visit her company, Hungry Passport Culinary Adventures, at www.hungrypassport.com.

KUDZU QUICHE

Serves 4-6

1 sheet frozen puff pastry, thawed
 ½ cup half and half
 4 eggs
 1 cup grated gruyère
 ¼ cup freshly-grated Parmesan
 3 oz. cream cheese, room temperature
 ¼ cup red bell pepper, small dice
 2 Tbsp. shallots, minced
 2 teaspoons canola oil
 1 cup loosely packed fresh kudzu (tiny leaves),
 cleaned well and roughly chopped
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 Tabasco sauce, to taste (optional)

Preheat oven to 375°F.

Lightly roll puff pastry to an 11-inch square and transfer to a 9-inch diameter glass pie plate. Trim excess, crimp edges and set aside.

Lightly sauté shallots and red bell peppers in canola oil, just long enough to soften them, and set them aside.

In a medium-sized bowl, whisk together eggs, half and half, salt, pepper and Tabasco. Blend in gruyère and parmesan, then the sautéed shallots and peppers. Work in the softened cream cheese (small lumps are okay). Stir in kudzu leaves.

Pour mixture into puff pastry crust, pushing in any leaves that may stick out, so they do not burn.

Bake until the crust is golden brown and the filling is set, about 25 to 30 minutes. Allow quiche to rest for 10 to 15 minutes before serving.

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